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A STUDY OF TENANT EXITS FROM HOUSING FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE

WHERE DO THEY COME FROM? WHY DO THEY LEAVE? WHERE DO THEY GO

Research Program

This study focused on formerly homeless people who live in two alternative housing programs run by Toronto agencies, both of which have a long history of providing innovative housing and related services for "hard-to-house" people. Although some of these tenants have done well in these housing programs and achieved housing stability, others have not, and are at risk of being evicted. This study investigated what helps some tenants maintain housing stability and what puts others at risk of losing their housing.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do "hard-to-house" tenants who are in the process of being evicted experience and understand their planned evictions? What are their struggles with maintaining housing stability and where do they plan to go if they get evicted?
2. What factors distinguish "hard-to-house" tenants in alternative housing who have stable housing from those at risk of being evicted?
3. What resources, programs, and policies do the major stakeholders (tenants and community housing workers who live and work in these housing programs) think would increase the housing stability of "hard-to-house" tenants in alternative housing?

The answers to these questions offer policy analysts, program designers, and service providers specific insights into the experiences and needs of formerly homeless tenants who are considered "hard-to-house." In addition, the study identifies important factors associated with housing stability that may allow service providers to improve their efforts at supporting tenants who are at risk of eviction.

Method

To allow for the incorporation of multiple perspectives, this study was carried out using multiple methods: in-depth interviews, focus groups, and a cross-sectional survey.

- Two sets of in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 tenants who had been given a notice that signified intent to evict by the housing programs. The eviction notices were either an N-4 (an eviction notice for rent arrears) or N-5 (an eviction notice for behavioural reasons). The first round of interviews focused on their housing history, why they thought they were facing potential eviction, and their housing plans if the eviction went through. By the time of the second round of interviews (three to six months after the first interview), five participants had been evicted or had left the housing programs voluntarily. Interview questions for these participants focused on their new housing or homeless situations. Seven participants were still in the housing programs. One participant had resolved the eviction notice and the other six still had current eviction notices

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that had been put on hold. Interview questions for these participants focused on what resources and support had helped them prevent eviction and remain housed.

- The researchers administered a cross-sectional survey to 106 tenants in the two housing programs. Of these tenants, 59 were in stable housing situations and 47 in unstable housing situations. The survey gathered demographic information as well as housing and homelessness histories, and assessed participants' housing stability. The questionnaire also contained standardized measures of quality of life, empowerment, social support, housing satisfaction, and meaningful activity.
- Lastly, two focus groups with 15 community workers from the housing programs were conducted to find out what helps or hinders tenants trying to achieve housing stability. The feedback from the housing workers also helped set the findings from the in-depth interviews and the survey in context.

Major Findings

The in-depth interviews illuminated participants' different pathways to homelessness, their experiences while homeless, the challenges they face, and the negotiations they make to stay in their current housing, as well as factors that contribute to housing instability. One such factor is unemployment and the meagre income available through income-maintenance programs. Even when employed, participants had jobs that were temporary and insecure, paid very low wages, and had no benefits. The lack of job security tended to increase participants' housing instability. Findings also showed that because participants' economic situations were so precarious, small misadventures often had disastrous consequences.

Other factors that jeopardized participants' housing stability include being "stuck" in a shared living situation that they described as deleterious to their health and well-being but being unable to move on because of the shortage of subsidized, self-contained, and independent units. Participants' environments frequently sabotaged their efforts to conquer addiction or improve their employability through skills training. Their difficult living conditions deprived them of the qualities normally associated with home and left them feeling homeless, even when they were housed.

Findings from the cross-sectional survey revealed no distinguishing demographic characteristics of participants with stable housing compared to those with unstable housing. In both groups, socio-economic indexes indicated that a majority of participants had been unemployed within the previous 30 days and had very low incomes of $499 a month or less from public assistance. However, more participants with unstable housing (60 per cent) reported having slept outside than participants with stable housing (37 per cent) during their last episode of homelessness.

Participants with stable housing and those with unstable housing did not differ significantly on standardized measures of social support, empowerment, quality of life (global, satisfaction with living situation, and safety and legal issues subscales), meaningful activities, and housing satisfaction. However, participants who reported past eviction notices but no current eviction notices were significantly different ($p < 0.05$) from those with past and current eviction notices in terms of their scores on the Quality of Life (QOL) living situation subscale and the housing satisfaction measure. Participants with no current eviction notices were more satisfied with their living situation and also reported higher housing satisfaction than those with current eviction notices. Female participants reported feeling less safe in their housing and neighbourhood than male participants. They had significantly lower scores than men on the QOL safety and legal issues subscale.

> **We just need more money, more affordable housing, bottom line, everybody says this. I mean, they can come up with money for the Olympic bid, which we lost, so all that money was wasted. So that money could have been put towards housing. If they want something, politicians find the money. So why can't they come up with money for affordable housing? North America is the richest [place] in the world, this should have never happened. How did it get like this? Politics. We aren't able to discuss mismanagement, politicians not doing their job properly, not caring.**
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> (An in-depth interview participant)

A multivariate logistic regression model with eight independent variables identified that social support and Quality of Life (satisfaction with living situation) were significant predictors of housing stability. Participants who had fewer social supports were more likely to have unstable housing, while participants who were more satisfied with their living situation were less likely to have unstable housing.

The housing staff who took part in the focus groups described several practices and policies within the housing programs that are essential for helping "hard-to-house" tenants maintain housing stability. The first is having staff on-site 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to deal with issues arising from the shared housing model. Staff stressed the importance of tenants having the proper supports before they move into housing and the importance of using a harm reduction philosophy in helping tenants maintain housing.

Staff described some innovative and creative programs that help tenants maintain housing. These included an in-house tenant bank, offering certain basic services within the building (for example, medical services), organizing excursions for tenants, providing meal programs, and employing tenants in-house. Staff also described eviction prevention practices such as providing information on legal rights, as well as the names and telephone numbers of legal clinics and resources to tenants who have received eviction notices, and a payment plan for tenants with rent arrears. Other eviction prevention practices are conflict resolution efforts, facilitated meetings, and resolution boards.

Staff described their approach to working with tenants as "a facilitative management approach" built on the principle of empowerment. They noted that working within this framework means that all decisions that affect tenants require "community agreements" through house meetings, staff and tenant committees, and other such forums.

> **Change the program [the rehab program] to help you get housing, it is very important to everybody. Nobody wants to walk out of here and sleep on a park bench, which I have never done in my life, thank God and I don't plan on starting now. A lot of these people do and if they don't have housing they will leave feeling really great, sleep on the park bench, meet their old friends they used to party with before and be right back where they started.**
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> (An in-depth interview participant)

Staff identified several issues that compromise tenants' housing stability. At the level of the individual, these included tenants' difficulties with money management and substance use and other unhealthy habits that may lead to violence that then leads to eviction. At the program level, staff identified a need for better staff education about addictions, aging, and transgendered issues as well as a need for programming and community connections for certain types of tenants (such as younger people). Systemic-level issues include shared accommodations, gaps in the health care support system, and the chronic underfunding of social housing and related services by all levels of governments.

> **Supports, community health supports for drug addiction, counselling, case management, training .... on the basis of this housing program, it would have to be case management, check and balance with the staff. Like when you have staff who are not used to doing that, it creates animosity .... People need housing and support. They need to deal with the root issues of things. Providing social housing is just providing a band-aid.**
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> (An in-depth interview participant)

Recommendations

The findings from this study underscore the need for a multi-dimensional approach to providing housing and related support services, if recurrent homelessness is to be addressed effectively.

1. The cornerstone of effective policies and practices that can prevent recurrent homelessness is the development of more affordable, self-contained housing units.
2. The building of more subsidized housing units must be integrated with the creation of more job opportunities, increased income supports, and sustained efforts to improve health, education, and employability.
3. All non-profit housing agencies should have clearly articulated protocols for preventing eviction and helping people keep housing during periods of housing instability, particularly agencies that house "hard-to-house" people. Such protocols should include a payment plan option for tenants with rent arrears and a conflict resolution and mediation process for resolving behavioural issues. Staff should help prepare individualized eviction prevention plans for tenants who they identify as experiencing housing stability.

4. Coordinated discharge planning for people leaving institutions such as jails and hospitals is essential to prevent recurrent homelessness. Professionals who have discharge planning responsibilities in these institutions need to categorize discharging a client to NFA (no fixed address) as an unethical practice, except where a client has requested such a discharge and has signed a consent letter confirming this.
5. Housing is more than just shelter—policies within housing programs need to specifically address the stigma and isolation of tenants and seek creative ways to connect them to the community.
6. Housing programs for "hard-to-house" people need larger programming budgets so staff can address tenants' multiple issues—ranging from the need for specialized support for mental health and addictions issues to social and recreational programs that address social isolation and build social support.
7. Housing staff must help educate tenants about their rights and responsibilities under the Tenant Protection Act as well as provide them with information on other housing options in the community.

Project Manager: Anna Lenk

Research Consultant: : Uzo Anucha, Research Associate
Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto

Housing Research at CMHC

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or contact:

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
700 Montreal Road
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0P7

Phone: 1 800 668-2642
Fax: 1 800 245-9274

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